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LIVING THROUGH THE HOLOCAUST

For many years after the war I found it impossible to address a group of people and to talk about my experiences during the holocaust. Oh, sometimes i would talk to my very close friends, sometimes i would answer questions asked by my children. I would even say something to my students in the class when there was a compelling reason. Other than that, I just couldn't talk about it.

This changed when i became aware that the truth about the holocaust was being denied. And not just by some individual extremists, but in an organized, systematic manner. And not just by the Liberty Lobby or the Historical Review, but by apparently respectable people, such as Dr. Butz, a history professor at Northwestern University. Dr. Butz wrote "The Hoax of the Twentieth Century," in which he called the holocaust a hoax that was carefully orchestrated to spread the false rumor that six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed by the Nazis.

That I could no longer tolerate. I felt that in a small way I can fight these deliberate lies. I felt that I owe it to my mother, my father, my little sister and brother, who perished in Auschwitz, that I speak out.

So, I want to share with you some of my experiences and some of my thoughts. And if one day you hear somebody questioning the reality of the holocaust, or hear somebody speaking disrespectfully about the six million, I hope you will remember what I am about to tell you.

I was born in Poland. I was thirteen years old when the war broke out. I was foolish enough to be glad, because I didn't have to go back to school.

I grew up very quickly. The Germans occupied Sosnowiec on the third of September, the third day of the war. After all, it was near the German border. They took the city without a shot; the tanks just rolled into our streets and that was that.

There were the expected things in the beginning. Decrees after decrees, curfews, bread lines. You couldn't get food, everything was closed.

Funny, my mother tried to buy food after we came back from the country. We were gone all summer and returned just a week before the war broke out, and our cupboards wee bare. But all she could get was what used to be expensive delicacies, fancy chocolates, canned caviar, pickled vegetables, but no bread, no flour, no eggs. It was so shocking being hungry for a piece of bread so soon.....

A few days after the Germans occupied our city they rounded up all the Jewish men. They came into our apartments (most of us lived in large apartment buildings), forced us into the courtyard, and took the men away. I am not sure how long my father was gone. It was probably not more

than a week. My father was only 39 years old then, he had a head of auburn hair. When he came back he was gray.

He never talked about what happened during the week. All we knew was that we were lucky that he came back, because some men didn't come back. But we thought - or so I was told by my parents - that this is what happens when a country is occupied. They try to put the fear of God into the hearts of the general population. Many non-Jews were also taken away. Some never came back. And of course, we knew that the Jewish people were singled out for special treatment - only we didn't know what treatment....

It was so gradual. They put a German overseer into our factory, and my father worked there. That was helpful, we got ration cards.

One day someone knocked on our front door. A woman, and two SS-men. They walked through our apartment. She turned to the SS-men and said: "Ich habe's gerne; alles!" I like it; all of it! The next day a moving van came. They took all our furniture.

We lived in what was then called an open ghetto. But we were not allowed into the main streets, we had curfews, we wore the Star of David.

There was little food. we were hungry. We were always hungry.

People started to disappear. At first, young men and women. They were taken to Germany, to labor camps. This wasn't so bad - families received mail occasionally, we knew where they were. But then, evacuations started. I know now that the word "evacuation" was an euphemism for something that was too terrible to call by its right name. By then we were in a closed ghetto and there was no contact with the outside world. There were rumors about all kinds of terrible things, but how could we believe them? We were still together; our family was still intact.

One day my father came home and told us about a conversation he had with Moniek Merin, the Head of our ghetto. Moniek Merin worked briefly for my father before the war, but during the war, when he became the Head of the ghetto, my father had very little contact with him. That day Merin had told him to come in and offered him the job of a militiaman. The militiamen in our ghetto were responsible for maintaining order, of course, and they were the ones who were also rounding up people for labor camps and evacuations. My father looked at Merin and said to him: "How can you ask me to do this?" "Aaron", said Merin, "if you become a militiaman you will have a better chance to stay on in the ghetto". After all, the evacuations are moving slowly, and there is a war going on. This was may end in a month, in three months, in a half a year. The longer you can keep your family together and stay here, the better your chances." I don't know what else Merin told my father. I don't know what Merin knew - he did have contacts with the SS-men, and there were so many rumors... But my father was a very traditional and a very believing man, and Merin knew that. He finally became exasperate - I guess he wanted to help my

father, he liked him - and he said, "Look Aaron, there are horrible things going on, and if you won't do it someone else will, and I won't have to spend time pleading with others, And for heaven's sake, it's your God who is watching it and is not lifting a finger to help, it is your God that is doing it!"

And my father answered, "I don't know who is doing it, but if it is God then I will not be His Malach Hamavet." If it is God, I will not be his angel of death.

Shortly thereafter I was taken away from home and was sent to a labor camp. For a half a year there was contact between our camp and the ghetto. During that time I found out that my younger sister was also sent to a labor camp. And then the labor camp was changed to a satellite of the Gross Rosen concentration camp, and mail from the ghetto stopped coming. It was at this time, I found out later, that our ghetto was liquidated...

We worked in a flax processing plant. The Nazis used us to replace the German workers who were sent to the front. We worked 12 hours a day, one week on a day shift, one on a night shift.

One day, a particularly cold winter day, I was working the night shift. We started working at six in the afternoon and at midnight we had a short break and got our soup. The soup was ladled out of a pot in which it came from the camp by the girl who was in charge. Her name was Salka, and she was lovely. She studied music in Italy before the war and she had a beautiful voice, a sweet soprano. Often, after we got our soup we would all sit around her, huddled together to keep warm. Sometimes we would be quiet, sometimes we would talk, sometimes Salka would sing. That night we sat very close to each other. And then Salka started to sing. She sang Schubert's Serenade. She sang it so beautifully, with so much feeling. We forgot where we were. We were in a different world, a world filled with flowers and sunshine - it felt so good, so warm to hear her sing...

Suddenly we realized that we were not alone. One of the SS-men was standing very close to where we were sitting. I turned my head ever so slightly and saw that he was looking at Salka with absolute rapture!

Salka stopped singing. It got terribly quiet. A minute or two passed. And then, the SS-man walked over to where Salka was sitting, pulled her up by her hair, shook her, and started to slap her on her face, right, left, right, left, beating her, shouting, screaming "You have no right to sing like this, you have no right to look like this, you filthy, dirty Jew!"

In 1944, late in November, we were evacuated from Graeben. Rumors had it that the Russians were near the border. We walked for days, and then were put into cattle trains. I don't know how long we were on those cattle trains.

We ended up in Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was a death camp. There were no gas chambers,

they were not needed. There was filth and lice, hunger and typhus.

We were packed in a barrack. There was only straw on the floor. We sat with our legs bent so that our knees touched our chins, because there was so little room. But this didn't last long. After only a few days there was room. Some of us started to die. We had to carry dead bodies and throw them on a big pile of bodies next to the oven. I never looked at the faces...

Frieda Ringler was my camp sister. We met in Graeben. She was Czech. We were very close and we shared everything we had. Sometimes one of us would get an extra bowl of soup. If the other wasn't there we would very carefully mark the half-level in the bowl, to leave for the other. I remember I'd eat my portion, eating slower and slower as I was getting closer and closer to Frieda's half. It was so difficult. I never gave Frieda one spoonful of my half. But I never gave her one less than what was coming to her.

I few days after we came to Bergen Belsen a young woman came to our barrack looking for Tilla Ringler. Tilla Ringler was Frieda's older sister. She had left home with a Zionist group trying to get to Palestine, and Frieda didn't know what happened to her. We later found out she ended up in Auschwitz.

The young woman who was looking for Tilla had survived Auschwitz. She was saved from the gas chambers by Frieda's sister, and she remembered it. Now she belonged to the lucky ones in Bergen Belsen. She had a job, she had a bunk, she was dressed, she had more food. Frieda approached her and said: "I am Tilla's younger sister. What do you know about Tilla?" The woman took one look at Frieda and said "My God, you look exactly like Tilla, you sound like her! I owe Tilla my life, so I am going to try to save yours. I am going to take you out of here right now!"

Frieda turned towards me and said "You have to take Bella, too. We are like sisters. I cannot go without her." The woman looked at me and at Frieda - she was hardened by now, there was nothing soft about her - and said sharply: "I will take you, you alone. Your friend means nothing to me. Either you come alone or you can die together with her." Frieda just stood there. I told Frieda to go. I said "You cannot help me by staying here with me. If you go maybe you will be able to help me, so please go and save yourself."

Frieda became a "runner" in the hospital that was a part of the "working camp." It wasn't easy to come to see me, but she tried. Sometimes she brought me some bread, some potatoes.

I was covered with lice. Every morning I would shake out my clothes, but a few hours later I was covered with them again. I was a walking skeleton. I had typhus, then typhoid. I don't know how I kept going...

One day Frieda came to see me. She managed to get me into a working barrack. I got a bunk

which I shared with another girl. But it was too late for me. Actually, I managed to work a week or so - that meant a soup a day, regularly - but then I got sick again. This time it was paratyphoid.

These were the last days of the war. The Germans knew it. Whatever food there was in the camp, they now withheld. There was no food, no water. I was too sick to know and to care. Most of the time I was feverish and unconscious...

One night Frieda came. She didn't see me for over a week and she knew something was wrong. It wasn't safe anymore to cross from one part of the camp to another - the SS-men were roaming around inside the camp and shooting. Frieda knew that it wasn't safe but she felt that she must come, she sensed, she told me later, that something was wrong.

She brought me water. She kept giving me water and she kept washing my face. She sat with me all night. That morning the British came into Bergen Belsen. We were liberated.

After the war I had a Din Torah with God. I couldn't forgive Him for the Shoah. I didn't want to have anything to do with God. I no longer had faith, I no longer had religion. I even contemplated giving up being Jewish, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't hand Hitler that kind of a victory.

Time passed. In 1959 I went to Israel for the first time. I went to the Galil, to the Kibbutzim. I saw ancient Safed. I walked the streets of Jerusalem. I walked into a synagogue.

Later, when I came back from Israel, I decided to study Torah, to study Hebrew. I needed to know what made my father - I loved my father very much - into the kind of person who didn't want to become God's Angel of Death, even if that would save him and his family. What made me not to cheat on Frieda when I was so hungry and so tempted. What made so many of us behave humanly when we were stripped of all that was human.

I read what our Rabbis taught through the many centuries. I read what our modern scholars wrote. I read Jewish history, Jewish philosophy.

I didn't look for answers or explanations for the Holocaust. I knew that these cannot be found.

But I found an answer for me about God and Auschwitz. For me the answer is that God was not in Auschwitz, and God didn't create Auschwitz.

Long ago God told us what was wrong and what was right. Long ago God gave us the freedom to do good or to do evil. Long ago God gave us the freedom to choose to respect life, to love life, or to destroy life. The Nazis chose to murder innocent men, women, and children. The Nazis tried

to destroy us, and our God. We were helpless, and perhaps God was helpless, too, and cried with us.

I gave this talk in 1986 in WTC. Belke Tovey

HT's talk at WHC's 50th Anniversary of the end of WW2
May 5, 1995

- P I was liberated from concentration camp Woebbelin by the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army on the third of May, 1945
- P Only, I didn't know it.
- I was born in Lodz, in Poland. Exactly one week after the war broke out, on September 8, 1939, German troops entered the city. I was 15 years old.
- P Within a few months the Jews of Lodz were herded into a Ghetto. There were some 165,000 of us, crowded into 1 and 1/2 square miles. Food was scarce, hygienic conditions terrible. Dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, were rampant. Very soon we were no longer 160,000.
- P In 1942 the Ghetto became a labor camp. Those who could not work -- the children, the old, the sick -- were deported to the Chelmno extermination camp. In the summer of 1944 the Ghetto of Lodz was liquidated. Those who survived until then were sent to Auschwitz.
- P My parents were murdered in Auschwitz. I was sent to a labor camp in Braunschweig, in Germany.
- P They fed us little and worked us hard, but we felt that the end cannot be far away. Toward the end of 1944 the British Airforce started to bomb Braunschweig on a regular basis, and the Germans offered very little resistance. We felt that if we could survive one more day, one more night, we would be liberated. And then, we dreamt, we would be taken somewhere, to a warm, clean place, where we could bathe for hours in big tubs full of hot water, where we would be given clean clothes, and above all, where we would be given food. Lots and lots of food.
- P Actually, I had a day almost like that in the dream while I was still in the camp. An air raid caused several houses near the factory in which we worked to ignite. Our SS guards decided to send us into the burning buildings to bring down clothing, bedding, and anything else of value left behind by the fleeing people. I was sent into a six-story building which was by that time pretty well engaged in fire, particularly the upper stories. I first tried the apartments on the lower levels, but they were locked and I had to go up as high as the 4th floor. The heat was intense there, but when I opened the first door I found myself in a kitchen which a family must have abandoned in the middle of a meal. There was bread on the table, and butter -- or margarine -- jam -- two kinds of jam -- and milk. And set me down at that table -- it was even covered with a table cloth -- and I cut myself a big slice of bread, spread margarine on it, then jam, and the other jam, and I ate.
- P This was the first time I wasn't hungry in 5 years!
- P A few weeks later the allied armies came closer to Braunschweig and we were

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evacuated. We were put on trains, cattle trains, of course, crowded like sardines in a can. We were taken first to the Herman Goerring Woerke (spelling?) camp, and then to Rawensbrueck (spelling?). There we were told we are being sent to Luebec (spelling ?), a port on the Baltic sea, where we will be released to the Red Cross and sent to Sweden. Nobody believed that. The rumor had it that they were going to put us on an old ship and sink it. Later we found out that this was in fact standard operating procedure for the SS at the end of the war, to eliminate as many witnesses to their crimes as they could. As it turned out, neither scenario played out. The tracks ahead of our train were bombed, and it had to stop. We were ordered out and marched to the nearest camp. It was concentration camp Woebbelin.

I was liberated from concentration camp Woebbelin by the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army on the third of May, 1945.

P Only, I didn't know it

P Woebbelin, unlike Auschwitz, had no long history. It was established just a few months before we came in. But while it did not have the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz, it was a very efficient death camp just the same

As general Gavin, the Commanding Officer of the 82nd Airborne put it,

"You could smell the Woebbelin concentration camp long before you could see it. And seeing it was more than a human being could stand. Even after three years of war it brought tears to my eyes.

"There were hundreds of dead about the grounds and in the tarpaper-covered shacks. In the corner of the stockade was an abandoned quarry into which the daily stacks of cadavers were bulldozed. It was obvious they could not tell the living from the dead.

"Living skeletons were scattered about, the living distinguished from the dead only by their somewhat greenish skin, in contrast to the blue-black skin of the dead."

P I was liberated from concentration camp Woebbelin by the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army on the third of May, 1945.

P Only, I didn't know it.

P You see, I didn't know it because I was one of the living skeletons distinguishable from the dead only by the somewhat greenish color of their skin.

Henry Tovey gave this talk at WHC in 1995

